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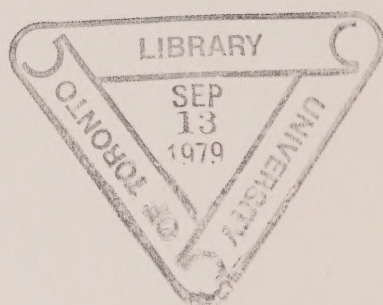
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Community conferences and seminars

Notes for
community leaders



Why a conference?

A community conference is a means of allowing people to become involved and to share in decisions related to the community they live in.

People can come together, obtain information, evaluate and discuss ideas and arrive at conclusions based on free expression, attitudes and opinions of the participants. They can recommend plans and policies related to the subject of the conference.

In your community, a conference can have a number of advantages. It can:

- provide a broader cross-section of community opinion than could be attained through a committee or a small group meeting
- create an opportunity for interested people to examine plans and ideas, and attempt to solve common problems
- stimulate and inform by communicating facts and ideas to the participants
- develop social values by giving each participant a sense of belonging, and the realization that he or she is a partner in developing the community
- take a comparatively short time. This makes it possible to develop a higher pitch of stimulation and enthusiasm than it would be possible to maintain over a longer period of time. Busy people are usually more prepared to concentrate time, thought and energy on a subject or problem if it does not entail a long and continuous commitment of their personal resources.

Types of conference

There are hundreds of subjects and situations that might be the basis for a community conference but they can usually be divided into the following types.

1. A conference that involves the whole municipal community regardless of its size. In general, this would deal only with subjects that affect the whole population.
2. A neighborhood conference that involves the problems of a single area and encourages the participation of the people who live there.
3. A neighborhood or whole community conference that deals with one specific interest or project, or with one age group. It usually attracts and involves just those concerned with its particular subject.

Initiation and organization

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There is no one way to conduct a conference.

Although this booklet offers some suggestions that may be helpful, success will depend largely on the initiative, ability and sincerity of those who plan and conduct it.

A conference at any level – local, regional or national – is a challenge, and the form, subject matter and procedures should be designed to fit the interests and needs of the community.

Conference leaders should be prepared to take on difficult and detailed work. They should include elements of showmanship in the proceedings and should make every effort to create a climate conducive to the development of friendly social relationships during the conference.

All arrangements should be completed before the conference starts. Once it is underway, it is usually too late to correct errors of omission.

Stages in developing a conference

There is no short cut to developing a successful community conference. Each stage requires thought and detailed planning. Usually the stages are:

1. The idea is expressed.
2. The situation is reviewed by an ad hoc advisory committee appointed for this purpose, and to determine whether the proposed conference should be held.
3. A conference co-ordinator or chairperson is chosen.
4. A conference committee is appointed to assume total responsibility for:
 - program
 - facilities
 - administration
 - publicity
 - reporting.

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5. The planning is done and stage is set for the conference.
 6. The conference is held. Participants are encouraged and enabled to express opinions and arrive at conclusions regarding items on the agenda.
 7. A conference report is prepared in an attractive and readable form for community-wide distribution.
 8. Steps are taken to submit the conference opinions and recommendations to the appropriate authorities.

The idea

A conference should begin with an idea. Someone in the community becomes concerned about a need, an unsolved problem, a desire for clarification or interpretation, a duplication of services, or some other aspect of community life. From this concern comes a statement: "We need a conference about this."

The idea is submitted to an agency or an organization that can do something about it. In most communities there are agencies that might sponsor a community conference. There is need to examine the idea to see if the subject and the time are appropriate. This decision can be referred to a small temporary committee of people who understand the situation and are interested in the subject. This ad hoc committee might be called an exploratory committee, advisory committee, steering committee or any other descriptive name.

Is the idea worth a conference?

The ad hoc committee is responsible for answering vital questions such as:

- is there enough interest in this subject to warrant a conference
- can we get adequate and suitable resources to make the conference worthwhile

- can we expect strong support from local organizations and institutions

- can we get suitable facilities

- would the conference conflict with the timing of any other community project that involves a large proportion of citizens?

The committee goes to what it considers the key sources of information and opinion in the community to find answers. On the basis of these answers, it recommends that the conference should or should not be held at this time. This ad hoc committee's function is now completed and the committee can be dissolved.

Planning the conference

In the planning process, care should be taken to involve appropriate organizations and people. The first step is to appoint a conference committee. Success or failure of the conference depends on the ability and work of this committee. Here are some thoughts regarding the conference committee:

- total responsibility for all aspects of the conference rests with the conference committee

- every member of the committee should be well informed and personally interested in the subject

- appointment of people to sub-committees should be on the basis of specific personal ability.

Responsibilities of a conference committee are frequently grouped this way:

- program

- facilities

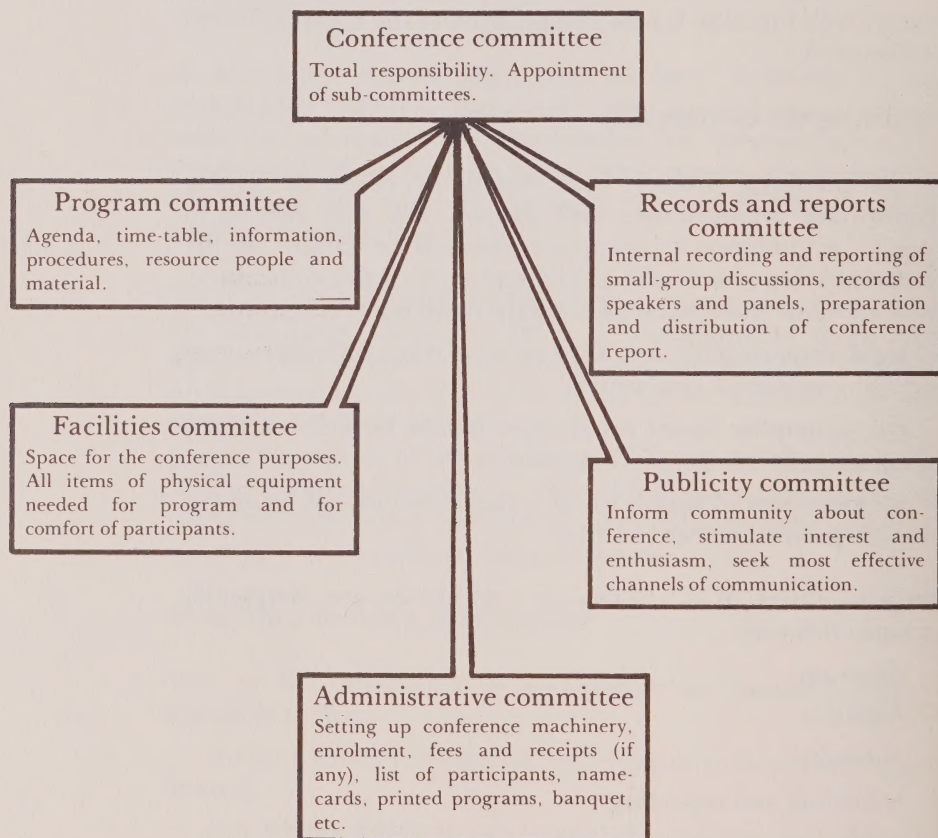
- publicity

- recording and reporting

- administration.

It is advisable to have a sub-committee for each of these responsibilities. In the interests of co-ordination, the chairpersons of the sub-committees should be members of the conference committee.

Each sub-committee chairperson usually has the privilege of appointing people to his or her sub-committee. Size of the sub-committees will depend on size and nature of the conference, and of the tasks to be performed.



Sub-committees go to work

Program committee

The program committee is the heart of the conference. Its work is important, detailed and exacting. It includes these major responsibilities:

- translating an idea into a program by drawing up an effective agenda and a time-table
- obtaining accurate, complete and up-to-date information for use at the conference
- securing suitable resource people and speakers
- finding suitable resource material
- determining the most effective conference procedures and planning. For example: panels or resource people should be prepared; resource materials should be issued at appropriate times; plenary and small group relationships in the conference should be studied and established; and so on
- planning the movement into buzz groups, into discussion groups, reconvening, etc., so that participants may be briefed
- checking with and informing the facilities committee regarding space and equipment requirements.

The program committee plans the form and methods of the conference, before the conference. During the actual sessions, it ensures that program procedures are operating smoothly.

Facilities committee

The facilities committee is responsible for housing the conference and for all physical equipment. Some of its concerns are:

- securing space for all aspects of the conference - enrolment, plenary sessions, small groups, meals, etc.
- providing maps of the location; signs and directions to meeting rooms; rules regarding use of rooms; washroom locations; eating facilities, etc.

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- arranging for physical items such as display space and displays; chairs and tables; special equipment, etc.
 - providing equipment such as PA systems, projectors, screens, tape recorders, and operators when needed.

There may be other physical factors that will need planning and attention from the facilities committee.

Publicity committee

The publicity committee has a two-fold job. It should inform people about the conference, and stimulate interest and enthusiasm to help create a good climate for it.

Some of this committee's responsibilities are:

- clearing all information to be used for publicity with the conference committee
- analysing channels of communication in the community and using those that will get the information to the greatest number of people who might be interested
- writing releases and getting them to the news media. The series of publicity releases should start with the information presented simply. It should build up to a pitch that peaks at the time of the conference. If you start to peak too soon, it can result in an anti-climax and loss of interest.
- avoiding dull and routine methods of publicity. The type of release and the information it contains should be selected to appeal to the people in the community who could be interested in the conference.

Publicity campaigns are more likely to be successful if they are based on one, or a combination, of the following appeals:

- personal interest
- curiosity
- loyalty to the community

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- significance of the project
 - desire to serve.

To sum up, effective publicity depends on the knowledge, initiative and ability of the committee members.

Administrative committee

The administrative committee is responsible for setting up and operating the administrative machinery of the conference which includes:

- enrolment of participants
- issuing name tags
- distributing programs
- fees and receipts, if any
- lists and addresses of participants
- meal tickets
- all financial transactions, records and other related responsibilities.

Records and reports committee

The records and reports committee has a key job because the impact of the conference and its effect on future developments will depend to a great extent on their work. Planning of methods and control of reporting procedures is vitally important.

The job of this committee has two parts - *internal reporting* and the *conference report*.

Internal reporting includes the process of recording small group discussions; reporting these back to the plenary group; records of speakers or panels; evaluation procedures; and other similar matters internal to the conference.

Planning for this part of the job should include:

- pre-conference meetings with the people who will act as discussion-group recorders. These people should be selected on the basis of ability.
- securing copies of key speeches in advance if possible.
- determining what should be evaluated, and how it should be evaluated. This should be considered before suitable procedures can be established.

The *conference report* should be prepared and issued as soon as possible after the conference ends. It interprets the aims, accomplishments and recommendations of the conference. It should go to the conference participants, citizens, agencies and organizations of the community.

The report should be accurate, concise, attractively prepared and illustrated. It should be written so that it is interesting and easy to read and understand.

Plans for the report should be along these lines.

- ☐ At every stage of the conference, channels of communication and reporting should be set up to collect material needed to complete the report
- ☐ An editor and a small editorial committee should be appointed to turn out the finished report as approved in its final draft by the conference committee
- ☐ Channels for distributing the report should be discussed, determined and used.

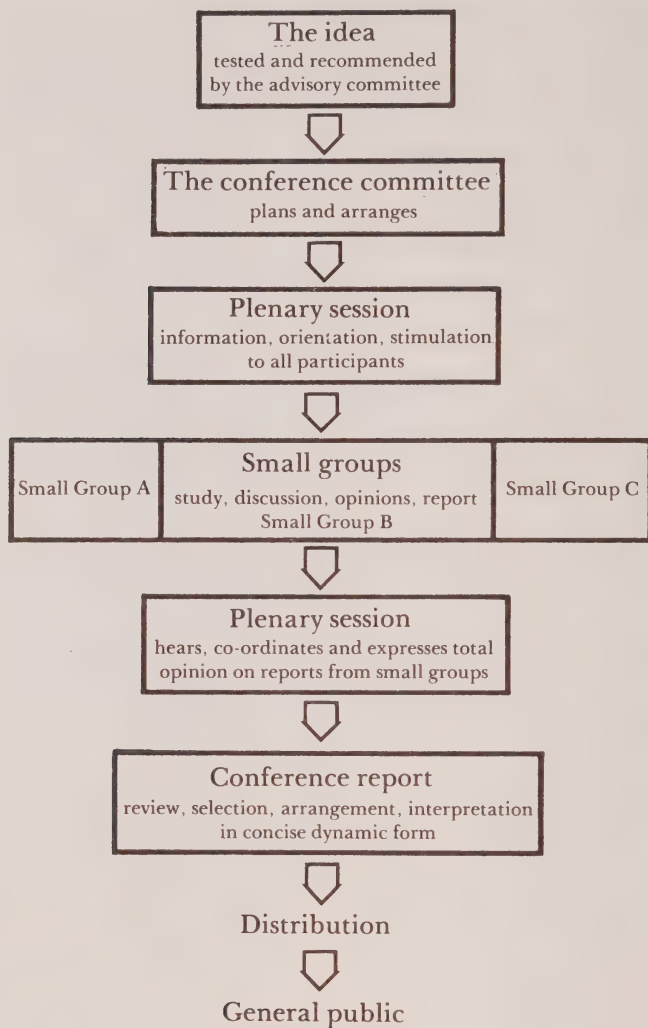
The conference in action

A review of the planning indicates that arrangements have been made for:

- an agenda and time-table
- housing and equipment
- information and publicity
- enrolment procedures
- recording methods.

Participants have arrived and are enrolled. The conference is about to begin. Participants will receive appropriate information and the conference situation should make it possible for them to express their ideas and opinions effectively.

The following diagram indicates an approach that has been used successfully in many conferences. However, there can be many modifications of this basic conference model. The conference committee and the program committee can devise the methods that fit their particular conference best.

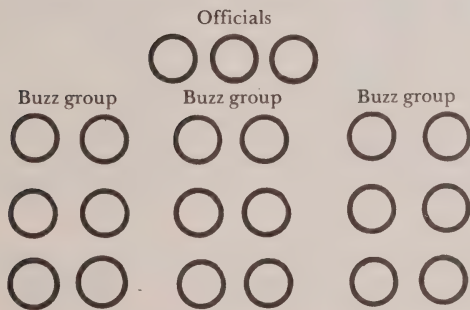
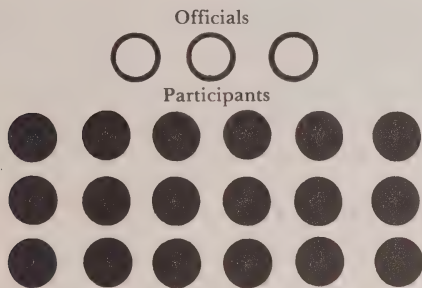


Discussion groups

Plenary session

All participants attend each plenary session. Sessions can be used to provide information or stimulation through speakers, panels, presentation of reports, films, slides.

The plenary can be used to determine the majority opinion of the conference.



Buzz sessions

The plenary session may split into small, temporary buzz groups for various purposes. Buzz groups should consist of eight people or less and all participants should be told how to form the buzz group, and to group and to dissolve on a signal from the chairperson. The buzz procedure should be short — not more than five or 10 minutes. Groups remain seated as in the plenary.

(catch: pickup up artwork and charts)

Each buzz group should delegate one member to:

- present a question the group wants considered by the conference
- give the group's opinion on a single question or plan
- express an evaluative opinion on one aspect of the conference subject.

Reports from the groups are submitted orally or in writing.



Small discussion groups

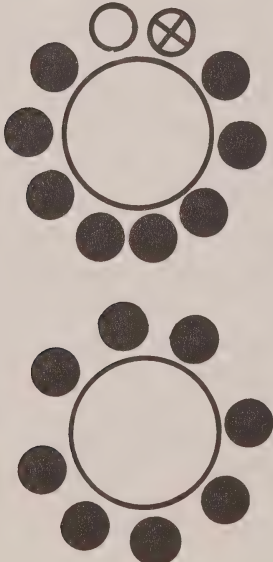
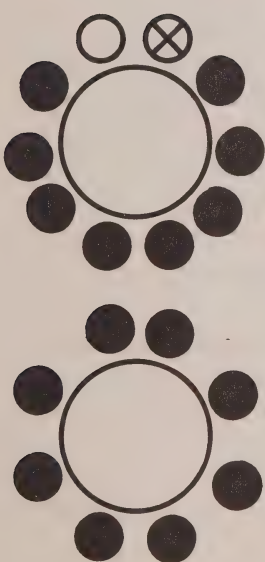
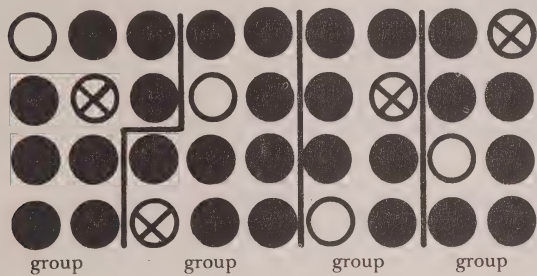
Division of the plenary session into small discussion groups gives each individual a better opportunity to express opinions and permits more intensive study of a problem or plan.

Discussion group sessions should be held in a quiet and separate location so that the group will not be distracted by other activities.

The process of separation and the location of each small group should be made perfectly clear to all. The most useful size is eight to 12 people although it is sometimes necessary to have more or less.

If these groups are to be effective, results of all of their discussions must be co-ordinated in a later plenary session.

Each discussion group should have a leader  and a recorder 



Goals

The conference planners can make or break the project. If the conference is to be effective and significant, each of the following is a must.

1. The conference must be as representative as possible whether it applies to a whole community or a specialized activity. Attendance and representation will depend largely on:

- publicity - extent, originality and vitality
- clarity of purpose - is the purpose of the conference worthwhile to the potential participants? Do they realize that it is?
- significance to the community - is this apparent to key organizations? To the general public? To the municipal authorities?
- previous conferences - did they establish a good precedent? Did they show that conferences are not a waste of time?

2. The information supplied to the participants by the conference should be:

- authentic, relevant, accurate and up-to-date
- as objective as possible. Various approaches to issues should be presented. The conference will develop opinions, provided it has the necessary information.
- presented in a clear interesting way. Methods may vary and include ways such as speakers, panels, films, slides, charts, bulletins, reports and so on.

3. Individuals must have an opportunity to express ideas and opinions and thus contribute to the conference process. This presents a problem both in mechanics and administration. There should be physical facilities for breaking up into small groups. The administration must allow for this and then be sure the work of the smaller groups can be co-ordinated effectively.

4. Conference reports should be concise, accurate and readable. Part of the conference procedure is to prepare and release a report:

- for the participants
- for wider distribution in the community.

5. Careful consideration should be given when a municipal authority approves or rejects the recommendations of a conference. Through the press, TV, radio, or by direct communication, conference participants should be made aware of any action or lack of action taken on their recommendations and the reasons.

These are general principles which might be applied to any community conference.

Danger signals

When a community, a neighborhood or an interest group proposes to have a conference, a few problems may develop. Most of these can be avoided or solved by an effective conference committee. Here are some of the most frequent mistakes.

- ☐ *Competition* The time you have selected forces people to choose between this conference and some other event.
- ☐ *Weak publicity* The very people you need and want at the conference may not even know it exists.
- ☐ *Lack of information* Factual, accurate, complete and up-to-date information should be available about any plan or issue to be discussed.
- ☐ *Lack of skilled leadership* While participants are the ones who make the decisions, it takes skilled leaders to set up situations in which the participants can be effective.
- ☐ *Confusion* Procedures must be absolutely clear to participants. This applies particularly when the plan calls for movements of groups to other locations.
- ☐ *Agenda too crowded* Don't try to cover too much too fast. Planning requires a realistic look at time and quantity.
- ☐ *Poor records* Unless the records are complete and accurate, the conference falls flat.
- ☐ *Unsuitable facilities* Crowded quarters, uncomfortable seats, poor ventilation and inefficient equipment are irritating and lessen the effectiveness of the group.
- ☐ *Poor follow-up* The conclusions and recommendations of a conference should receive every consideration from the authorities. If no action can be taken on the recommendations at the time, the conference participants are entitled to know the reasons. If they are not given them, the first conference will likely be the last.
- ☐ *Dull proceedings* When proceedings are dull and drag along, participants are soon bored and inattentive and the conference may die on the spot. Avoid this by injecting color, life and showmanship. Make sure the conference moves smartly.

Sample of conference planning

Conference theme:

Examination and evaluation of the total recreation program in the community

The original suggestion for the conference may come from one or more sources. It will involve the entire community and covers such a broad field that planning will take time and effort. Assuming that the conference will be sponsored by the municipal recreation council, the first step is to draw together a conference committee. The committee should be both able and interested in program, facilities, records and reports, administration and publicity. It should represent:

- institutions, e.g. schools, churches, library
- significant organizations, e.g. YM-YWCA, home and school, service clubs, etc.
- organized interest groups, e.g. sports, crafts, music, art.

Sub-committees can go into action as soon as appointed. Here are some suggestions for activities at this stage.

The *program committee* should:

- find the necessary information which could be adapted from a recent survey. It is preferable to release information before the conference, but it can be released at the conference.
- work on the program agenda. This will require thoughtful selection and arrangement of subjects.
- seek out the best possible resource people as individual speakers or as panel members. They should be thoroughly briefed regarding the purpose of the conference and their roles in it.
- plan the conference operation including small groups and plenary sessions.
- discuss and select resources such as displays, pictures, maps, tape recordings, etc.

The *facilities committee* should:

- plan for a large conference. The most appropriate facility would be probably a community centre, a high school or similar large building. The facilities committee should keep in close touch with the program committee regarding the date when conference proceedings will be ready for action.
- after securing tentative approval for a conference site, make or get a plan of entrances, parking, rooms, halls, etc., in order to plan activities.

The *publicity committee* should:

- go right ahead drawing up a publicity campaign, exploring the channels of communication, establishing good relations with the press, TV, radio and other methods of mass communication. The first release should make the community aware the conference is being planned for a future date.
- keep in close touch with the other sub-committees regarding content, time, place, procedures, etc.

The *administration committee* should:

- work with the facilities committee regarding the mechanics of enrolment
- work with the program committee regarding the possible use of color tags to indicate division into small groups
- work with all sub-committees to work out a budget of conference expenses
- get necessary name tags, cards, receipt books, etc.
- delegate specific duties related to enrolment.

The *recording and reporting committee* should:

- set up the necessary machinery in advance, although its actual work does not begin before the conference starts. There will be no time to do it once the conference starts.

For this committee:

- a plan of action must be determined and people delegated to specific jobs within the plan
- arrangements must be made for typists, cutting stencils, duplicating machines, appointing group recorders, etc.

The basic procedure at the conference could be similar to the following diagram.

Enrolment

Fee (if any), name-cards, programs. Assignment to small discussion or working groups by choice or delegation. Letters, numbers or colors to indicate the groupings.



Plenary session

Briefing re procedures. Opening remarks (information, stimulation, interpretation, etc.) Well-prepared speaker, symposium or panel opens up conference. Buzz-groups may be planned to stimulate full participation.



Small groups

Setting up questions or problems for study by the discussion and working groups.

They may all discuss the same question.	Each may discuss different aspects of the same problem.	Each may discuss a different issue of problem.
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Small groups report to plenary session

Plenary group may hear many opinions and suggestions about the same question.

The various reports are heard and co-ordinated into a conference opinion by the chairperson or

The plenary group is informed on each of the subjects studied by the small groups.

The community council

Some communities have set up a community council to discuss and evaluate needs, plans and policies affecting the community. Members of the council are each delegated from one of the organizations in the community and presumably, as a group, represent the opinions of those organizations.

This council meets at regular intervals, and in its advisory capacity, can make recommendations to the appropriate municipal authority. In the field of leisure time activities, the community conference can supplement the functions of the community council. The conference may possibly replace a meeting of the council because:

- the conference can involve a larger number of people and thus provide a broad cross-section of public opinion as a sounding board for planning. At the same time the conference can interpret values and plans to a wider public
- the conference can give concentrated attention to a community problem for a short time and so draw in a number of people who would be unable to give up more of their time
- great enthusiasm may be stimulated and maintained for the duration of the conference
- dynamic publicity campaigns can be very effectively applied to a special project such as a conference
- the conference method is flexible and can be adapted to a whole community or to a special interest group.

Officers

A discussion group leader

The leader of a discussion group:

- is responsible for getting the discussion started
- guides the group through each stage of decision making
- encourages the expression of individual opinions
- makes sure that each new idea is clear to all and is considered by the group
- encourages summarizing at appropriate times
- has a general knowledge of the subject under discussion enabling him or her to keep individuals and the group from wandering from the subject
- develops friendly understanding among the individuals.

The more experienced and co-operative the members become, the less they need a leader in their discussion.

What makes a good leader?

The group achieves more when the leader shows desirable personal attitudes.

A good leader is:

- friendly
- fair but firm in protecting the opinions and status of each member of the group
- patient in difficult situations
- a clear thinker in helping the group to interpret
- not aggressive in urging his or her own opinions
- able to summarize clearly and concisely
- sensitive to the extent of group agreement at any point in the discussion
- confident that the group decision will be more effective than the decision of any individual.

A good leader should have:

- knowledge and skill—the know-how of group leadership techniques
- experience—practice in leading people to effective group decisions
- understanding—a warm appreciation of the purpose and the people.

A recorder

The recorder's job is most important when the discussion group wants to keep a cumulative record of its decisions on the various aspects of a plan or a problem, and when it is one of a number of groups that are each preparing a report for submission to a plenary session.

The recorder is more at ease and prepares a most useful report when he or she:

- is able to summarize clearly and to express ideas well in writing
- has experience and technical knowledge of the process of group discussion
- has a good general knowledge of the subject under discussion
- has a leader who sees to it that the group is using good discussion techniques.

At suitable intervals or at the conclusion of the discussion, the recorder should read the notes to the group to be sure that they represent an honest expression of the group's opinions. Actually, the recorder is preparing a synopsis of the whole discussion. It should tell the story without including a mass of detail. It should be impartial, accurate, concise.

The recorder:

- does not attempt to keep the word-for-word record one would expect from a stenographer or court reporter
- listens carefully but takes little or no part in the discussion except to re-state or clarify a point in the notes for the benefit of the group
- records only the main topics or problems presented in the discussion, the relevant opinions and the group decision or opinion if one is reached
 - if asked, can give a quick review of the progress of the group up to that point
- includes in the report any strong minority point of view expressed during the discussion
 - prepares a concise written summary which interprets the group decision and indicates how it was reached
- does not express his or her own opinion but reflects and interprets the opinions and attitudes expressed by the group.

Reaching decisions

To reach a considered decision a group should go through six clearly defined steps.

1. *Recognize the problem.* What are we talking about?
2. *Examine the problem.* What do we know about this and similar situations?
3. *Examine the facts.* Do we need more information? Where can we get it — books, pamphlets, films, people, etc.?
4. *Propose tentative decisions.* What is your opinion — and yours — and yours — and mine? In each case, does the group accept, modify, reject?
5. *Select the most acceptable decision.* After examining all of these decisions, where are we as a group?
6. *Evaluate in retrospect.* What have been the consequences of the action or opinion that we accepted?

The seminar

The word seminar is used here to distinguish between a group meeting and a course.

In a course, each participant comes to acquire basic skills or knowledge. In a seminar, each participant is expected to be able to make a personal contribution based on previous training, experience and reading. The seminar is a conference made up of knowledgeable people who contribute and learn at the same time. It can be a valuable tool to the community.

Some purposes of a seminar

Although there are many other uses, a seminar is particularly valuable in the following ways.

1. Planning

Planning is the process of setting the course for either a total operation or for a particular aspect of it. The planners who draft and submit a plan should have:

- experience
- knowledge of community procedures
- knowledge of community needs, desires
- an understanding of groups and individuals
- ability to cope with ideas.

Any plan should be examined in the light of:

- its contribution to the community as a whole
- its appeal to individual citizens
- resources it would require
- demands on the time and efforts of the leaders
- divisions of work, delegation of duties and the co-ordination of the whole plan.

An important part of planning is the ability to foresee pitfalls and to predict problem situations. A seminar considers these and tries to keep them to a minimum. This is a place for experience rather than wishful thinking.

2. Problem solving

All organizations run into problems. Knowledge and experience are the best tools to use in finding a solution. This makes the seminar useful in coping with problems of relationship, apathy, communication, etc.

3. Policy making

Policy grows from consideration of the questions:

- what attitude should this group express regarding this situation?
- what action, if any, should it take under these circumstances?

The answers sum up the policy of the group. Each question should be discussed thoroughly and all implications considered. Naturally this can be done best by a knowledgeable and experienced seminar group.

4. Evaluation

Evaluation is the critical analysis of an accomplishment, a project or an idea. Like the opinion of a judge, evaluation should be based on evidence which is accurate and adequate.

A seminar group can:

- determine what evidence is needed
- get it
- arrive at opinions based on a study of the facts.

A seminar group which is experienced in a particular field is much better equipped to sift the evidence and draw conclusions.

Much evaluation is post evaluation after the event has taken place. An experienced group should also develop the talent of pre-evaluation of a new idea or suggestion. This would be an attempt to predict the probable effects and to assess the proposal accordingly. If this is done sincerely and without prejudice it can save a lot of headaches.

Role of a seminar

After studying a situation, a seminar can recommend policy changes, solutions to problems, action, evaluation of a project, etc. However, the seminar has no authority whatever to run anything. Any change in policy, action, direction must be confirmed by members of the community before it can be acted upon.

To explain the role of the seminar in its simplest form:

- a seminar type of conference can recommend, on the basis of thorough investigation, a solution, a plan of action or a policy change
- after those concerned have agreed to a course of action, a seminar group can assume the responsibility for carrying out the project, e.g. a publicity campaign, a safety campaign, operation of a training course, a community bulletin, etc.

Operation of a seminar

To be effective, a seminar must be efficiently planned and carried out. Here are some questions to be answered.

- ☐ Who initiates and plans it?

The initiator should be the appropriate person in the community. Potential participants should share in the planning and selection of content. Some of this advance work can be done by correspondence.

☐ Where and when will it be held? Has thoughtful consideration been given to:

- adequacy and convenience of the site
- the allowance of suitable time for participants and other resource people
- the possibility of conflict with timing of other important events?

☐ Resources

Is the supply of visual and written resources checked and available? Are the resource people confirmed for the date?

☐ Method

Does the plan seem to make the most effective use of the resources?

☐ Reports

If the seminar is to have the desired impact, has a method been worked out for the quick and wide distribution of the ideas and opinions produced by the seminar?

☐ Public relations

Do the participants really know what it's all about?

These are just a few suggestions. The initiative of the planners should produce many more constructive ideas.

But whether you plan a conference or a seminar, the involvement of the greatest number of people in the community should be the aim. Collective decision making by the majority should be the outcome.

Further reading

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Other titles in this series are:

- Administration
- The community
- Community organizations
- Effective meetings
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- Leaders and members
- Program planning
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